

The Construction of a Home

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Do you have to travel to be at home? College students are essentially displaced, moving from a childhood home but remaining transitory. A space to reflect on the qualities of home appeared on campus, asking observers to simply slow down, sit, and "Tell me about your home." An individual design-build project challenged my knowledge of construction, ability as a maker, and intuition as a designer after four years of architectural education. I erect a small structure whose design is informed by my discomfort regarding my sense of home on campus and users discuss with me their ideas on what makes a home. Most students live away from what they would call "home" while at school, but this project asks "Do you have to travel to be at home?" The simple presence of the structure on campus draws in fellow students, providing an opportunity to remove themselves from frequently emotionally numb surroundings and reflect.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Andrea Swartz for advising me during this project. She has served me not only as a professor and role model, but also a consistent source of encouragement and confidence throughout this project and much of my architectural education.

I would like to thank the students and visitors to Ball State who took the time to experience my built project and leave their responses regarding their home.

The Construction of a Home: Artist's Statement

At its core, this project was an opportunity to do two things that I felt I hadn't yet been able to do in my four years at Ball State: to realize an architectural design at full scale, and to use my architecture evoke reflection and response. In the College of Architecture and Planning (CAP), there is ample opportunity to have a design critiqued. The opinions of professors and peers are not hard to find; often, they are hard to escape. The problem with this reality is that it leaves us with a lot of conflicting conjecture on how users might react, how the environment might respond, how our architecture might live in the world. We (by necessity) become experts at representing hypothetical designs on paper and in physical models, and at catering our illustrations so they may positively resonate with our critics. Nearly all projects require an exploration into structure, a base understanding of which we gain through structures and building technology classes. But I always found that, no matter how many wall sections or structural diagrams I might draw, I didn't feel truly comfortable in my understanding of construction because I had never done it with my own hands. The Honors Thesis presented a chance to feed my desire to understand architecture on more intimate, first-hand terms. I would construct a small structure of my own design representing what I believe architecture should always value: clarity, function, and aesthetic.

The drive to construct a habitable "building" before I ended my undergraduate education was developing in my mind simultaneously with realization that the college campus can very often be a cold, depersonalized place. We are not encouraged to open ourselves to emotional exploration except behind tightly shut doors. College students would probably argue they don't even have the *time* to slow down and reflect on our personal thoughts and struggles; a distraction of this type could derail our studies for far too long. But we all struggle with something, and we need a venue to reflect on these conflicts and concerns and to feel like they matter and that we are being heard. This structure I wanted to build could serve this function; it could become a safe space for reflection or rest from the routine that can drive a student to numbness to even his or her own struggles and emotions.

As much as I wanted to create a space for general reflection and contemplation, this vagueness didn't facilitate cohesive conversation amongst my users. What a daunting request of the user to sit down between classes and quickly identify your deepest desires and concerns and share them with me, simply to gauge the mood of a campus. The piece needed a question

to guide the users thoughts, so I chose a theme that I was contemplating more as I entered the last year of my undergraduate education: the concept of a home.

Throughout college, I had slowly but surely begun to build a life apart from my roots of living in my parents' home and my hometown. Gradually, every time I returned home, that place felt less familiar, less like it was the only place where I simply belonged. I was going away for months at a time, growing as a person, while my emotional and physical surroundings at home had paused when I was 18 years old and moved to Ball State. While I also began feeling more comfortable building a home at school with every passing semester, I always knew that place was temporary. There was an inherent discomfort in knowing that I can't really plant myself here, because this is all going to end when I graduate. I began to realize, and continued to realize as I completed this thesis, that I may never be able to replicate the sense of comfort and belonging of my only childhood home. Surely, the thing I call home is not the house in my hometown. The feeling of sureness in my home was dependent on my lack of experience as an individual in the world. Creating a physical home would require, in more ways than one, staying stagnant in life, something I'm simply not prepared to do at this stage in my life, even if it does leave me with an unpleasant longing for the familiar. Recreating my emotional home would be more elusive, and it may even be a step backwards; it was never my desire to regress, even if the bliss of innocence which defined made my childhood home would never return. This new consciousness pushed me emotionally further and further from my two homes, into a limbo of discomfort and impermanence.

As college students, my peers on campus were the ideal audience to discuss this conflict with me: most everyone is similarly in transition, being displaced, and carving out his or her independent space in the world. I couldn't be sure that everyone around me was struggling with what makes a home, but I could confess my confusion and worry to the world and provide a space where observers could mentally remove themselves from the familiarity of crowds and surroundings imprinted on our daily lives. I set out to create a small structure with clarity in its intent: as a place to reflect and contemplate the question of a home. The design was not secondary to the social question but integral to it. Whether or not the users and observers were going to feel the same conflict in their sense of home as I felt about mine, I could build a space that physically mimicked how I now feel about the place I currently call "home": unsettled, displaced, and uncomfortable. At the same time, the space needed to invite passersby to participate, and feel it was an intimate, safe space where emotional walls of the every day could come down.

Once the theme and conceptual intent was decided, I began design. The proportion of the human body informed the size and shape of the space: the mood of the space would hang in a balance of intimate versus cramped, enclosed versus open, shielded versus visible. As I was inviting users into my own psyche, so to speak, I made many scale-related decisions based on my own body's proportions, maybe inviting a certain degree of physical discomfort in those larger or smaller than me. I produced small, rough models in an effort to capture spaces that embodied my concepts. I eventually moved to full-scale mock ups to explore how this spatial essence might be translated using construction methods I understood at my current skill level, or methods I felt I could master over the course of the project. I always value craft in my design projects, but I certainly could not have users distracted by poor craftsmanship in a space I expected them to enter.

The desire to create a truly unique and beautiful space, and the knowledge that I had to construct that space by the end of the semester were mutually destructive ideas throughout the design process. Part of my intent in this project was to become more comfortable in my knowledge of structure and my construction ability, but the designs I was creating were a little grander than my abilities. This struggle did make design and construction quite an emotional journey. After enthusiastic encouragement from my advisor to simply get out of my head and off my computer, I formed a basic plan and forced myself into the wood shop to begin construction. Out of this experience a skewed form emerged, suggesting an awkwardness at a tight scale promoting the quiet intimacy I desired. With the structural frame completed, I felt an enormous sense of accomplishment at this step, and began to embrace the clarity in simplicity of what I was building. I could now inhabit the final design I had been refining, and make the design decisions regarding enclosure and user participation.

The materiality of the skin enclosing the space allowed visual permeation, and created a clear and quiet aesthetic. I liked the idea that a passerby might know someone is using the space, but the user still had some privacy with his or her thoughts. Inside the structure, a reflective material on the skin has an unexpected effect on the interior space, and creates a level of disorientation. The permeation of the skin also produces a degree of separation to encourage users to look out on a world in which they are normally integrated, and instead look inward on their own thoughts and opinions. The design and materials of the facade generated a kind of lightness that balanced well with the sense of discomfort and ambiguity I was causing with the decisions of scale and shape I had already established. The duality of the interior and

exterior materials, as well as the skewed shape and proportion of the entire piece, produced an experiential architecture that remained functional in its design.

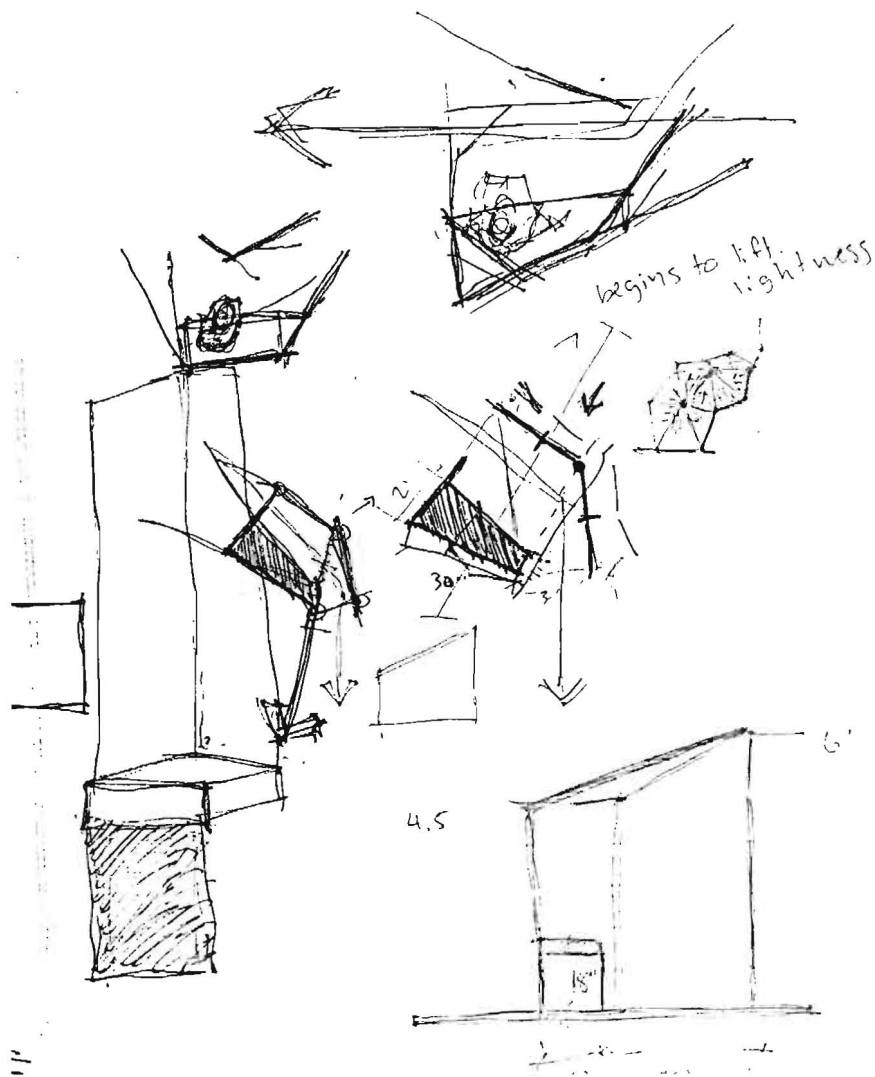
While I still needed evidence of user participation, I didn't want physical responses to weigh too heavily on the visual design. Every new user should get to experience the space in its pure form. To facilitate this type of response, I placed a piece of clear plastic on the wall across the bench in the structure, along with some markers. Dry erase markers left the space open to interpretation and response by users when I could not be there to discuss the fundamental question of the space with every observer. I could also record responses and "reset" the board when it filled up, or reset it to bring it to another venue with a new audience. A set of markers and a simple explanation of the piece left in the structure were enough to get an even greater participation than I could have imagined.

This final, physical product had a certain degree of a "guerrilla artwork" attitude to it. I simply erected it in front of the College of Architecture and Planning with little announcement and let it live in the world for a few days. I did visit often, but I found it taking on a life of its own. People began to leave notes and sketches on the plastic and all over the walls of the structure. Nearly all responses were respectful, genuine responses of people trying to share their ideas of a home with me. Its quietness and simple request to "Tell Me About Your Home" seemed to evoke more responses than if I had been there all day to ask people to use the space and tell me what they thought.

Responses varied from the typical ("Home is where the heart is"), to the cryptic ("It's not blue!"), to the unsure ("Home is a memory"). One person even left a simple "IDK", a generation's expression of bewilderment. Some might call it the easy way out of the question I was asking, but it delighted me. Sometimes, we just don't know, and it's alright to not know. A number of people left the names of home towns, and many expressed different ways of internalizing their sense of home. For these people, it meant a feeling of belonging and love, but I wonder what else promotes those feelings inside of them? There must be a physical or even geographical element that contributes to these feelings of belonging. I didn't find the most surprising or profound thoughts on the idea of home, but it was exciting to see how participants expressed themselves nonetheless.

Upon completion of the thesis, I feel a great amount of pride in what I achieved as an individual. The first-hand construction experience may not have been that of a traditional job site, but I learned more from my project about my personal ability and values than I have ever learned from hypothetical designs. I did not erect anything architecturally ground-breaking, but

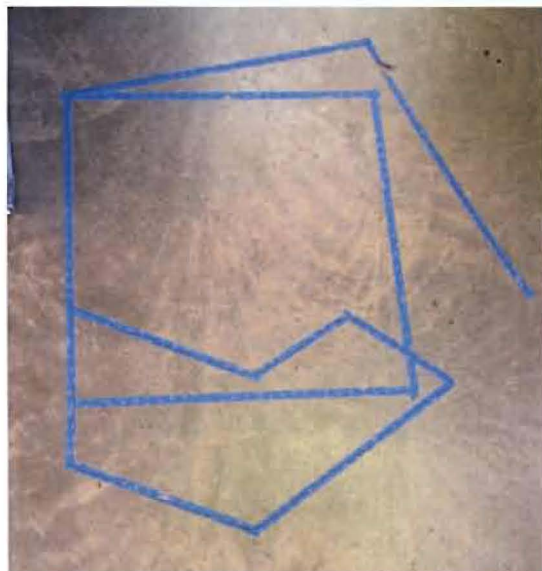
the quiet simplicity of my design created a space that more than achieved what I set out to do, even by my own hyper-critical standards. I am also very satisfied with the social aspects of my project. I was able to start a conversation with my peers, most of whom I did not know and never met, past knowing that they took the time to participate in my project. This piece managed to challenge my design ability and allowed me to challenge the users. While I did not (and did not expect to) find a solution to my quandary, this piece let me share it with my users. After all, my need to create an intimate space on campus for reflection stemmed from a need to share and allow my peers to share the concepts that worried them. All I can ask is that I served the user and planted the seed of a conversation amongst college students: Do you have to travel to be at home?



DESIGN



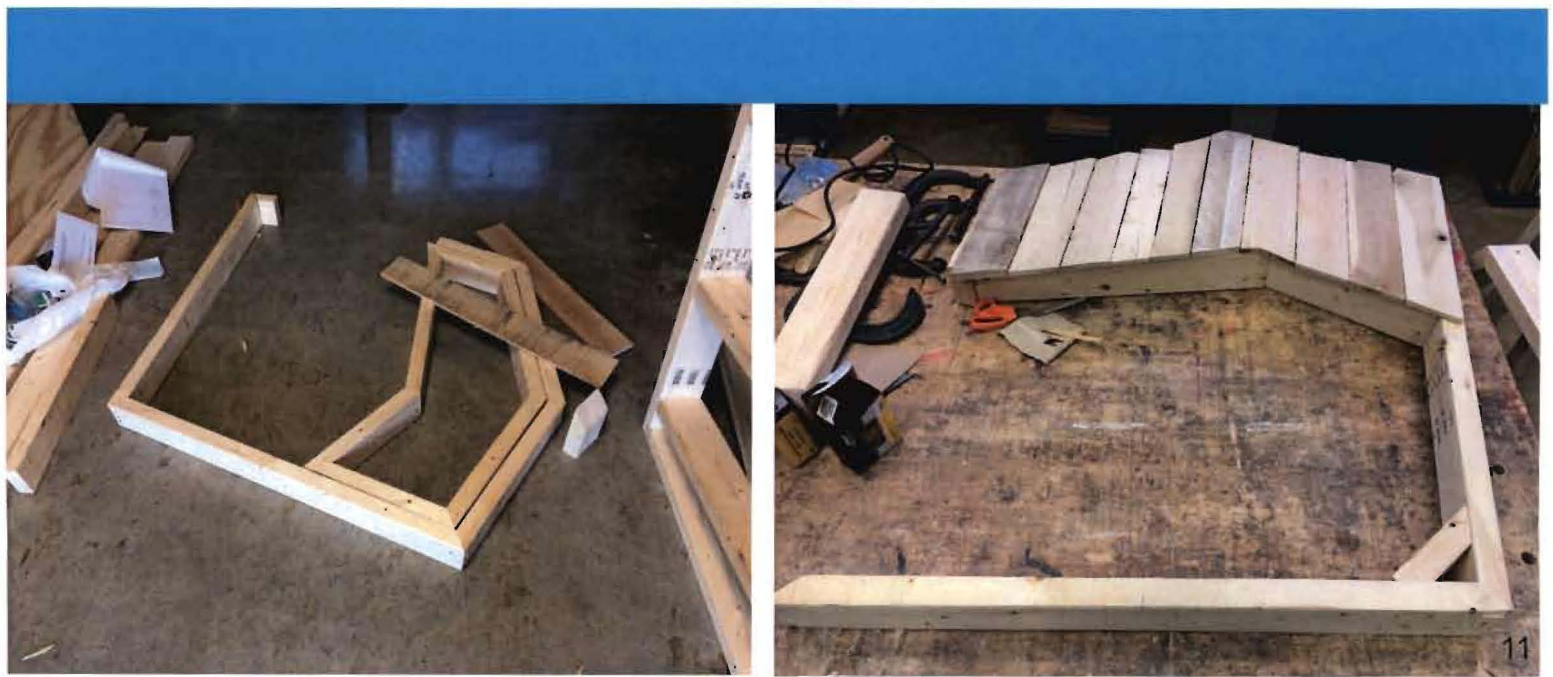
Once the conceptual intents of intimacy, awkwardness, disorientation, etc. were outlined, visual design began. Forms were explored through sketch, study model, and full-scale mock up. Study models and sketches helped translate conceptual ideas into visual entities, while mock ups allowed consideration of spatial quality at the human scale. All informed final the final realization of the design.





CONSTRUCTION

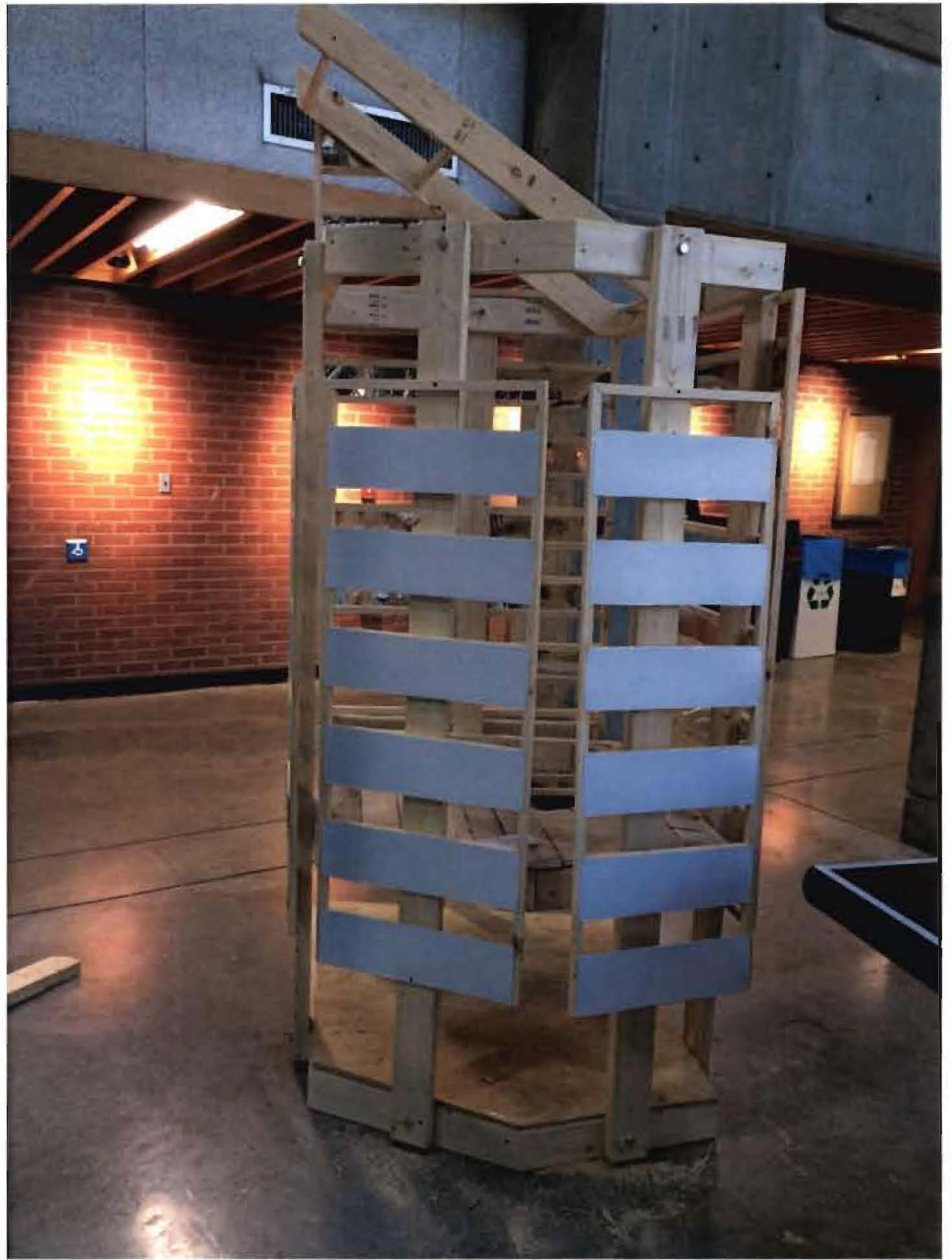






CONSTRUCTION





The piece was first constructed in the Architecture Building to allow extended experimentation with form and construction method. Visual design and conceptual intent continued to evolve throughout the construction process as the design was realized at full scale.





ARRIVAL





FAQ

Hi. I'm Kellie, a fourth-year architecture student, and you're sitting in my Honors Thesis. Here's a list of the questions I heard while I was designing and building my project:

What is it???

I don't know. You decide! If you aren't feeling creative, it's a bench. A place to think and look out on the world.

Why?

I like to build things. I wanted to do a project before I graduated that was small enough that I could realize at full scale and let people inhabit and experience.

What should I do?

Whatever you want. Just enjoy it. But I would consider it a personal favor if you thought about your "home" and what makes you feel at home. Take a marker and leave a response on the clear plastic in front of the bench so I can learn about your thoughts about home. A word, a sketch, a name, anything will do.

Thank you for being part of my project and my experience at Ball State.

The piece appears on campus with little announcement or introduction. A small number of 3"x5" flyers (shown above) were placed around the architecture building to invite my colleagues to see the piece, but participation was left open to all. A list of "Frequently Asked Questions" (also shown above) was placed inside the space. The explanation provided by these materials is meant to be open-ended so that each user's experience might be as self-defined as possible.



CONTEXT

The piece was positioned on campus outside of the Architecture Building, turned to shield the user to some extent from the often busy sidewalk adjacent to the site. This orientation guides observers slightly away from the path of this sidewalk to draw them into the space. The prompts "Tell me about your home" and "Do you have to travel to be at home" create a curiosity in the observer.





DETAIL







SPACE







HABITATION







PARTICIPATION





Response was surprisingly enthusiastic. The project received a lot of participation, and multiple compliments were left along with responses to the prompt. Users' enthusiasm allowed the project to take on a life of its own even beyond the intended user spatial definition. Responses ranged from single words, extended explanations, sketches, names, and pieces of advice to other observers. On reading the words left from various visitors, there was a sense of warmth and support in the space, a knowledge that it was a safe space to simply separate oneself even for a moment.



DECONSTRUCTION



Pictured left: The piece is prepared for rain

Pictured above: The piece is broken down and transported to a new location. It will be shown as part of a First Thursday gallery in Muncie on May 1, 2014.